The Plow Woman

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CHAPTER XXXII.

THE wide valley was brown, with green splots and tracings for slough and stream. The distant ranges were gray. The sky showed the misty blue of the dog days. Far off to the north and west black streaks edged the horizon, where smoke rolled up from prairie fires.

Brannon was quiet to the point of lethargy. Guard was mounted and daily dress parade held ceremoniously. The trumpet blew its unvarying round of commands. There was no hunting and no field duty beyond the scouting of the eastern shore. The hoarse salute of an upward plying steamer roused the garrison to life one morning, but the interruption lasted barely half an hour. Then the steamer, her pilot house screened by sheet iron and her decks aswarm with infantry, rounded a bend in the river and went coughing away out of sight. Once again interest centered at the site of the pony corral, where a platform was slowly building.

Life at the shack was even less eventful. For Dallas it was a season of idleness. The pumpkins and the melons were swelling. The tasseled corn wanted weeks before it would ripen. The field and garden were free of weeds. With no work to do, alone except for her sister, the elder girl had ample time to worry.

Marylyn saw that she was dispirited and increased in tenderness toward her, following her about with eyes that entreated yet were not sad. At breakfast she spitted the choicest cuts for Dallas. In the noon heat she was at her elbow with a dipper of ginger beer; at supper coaxed the elder girl's failing appetite by offerings of tasty stew, white flour dumplings and pone. As for herself, Marylyn needed neither urging nor tidbits. She ate heartily. Her sleep was a rest for both body and mind. Every afternoon she strolled across the bend to the cottonwoods. The butterflies fared beside her. Overhead between sun and earth hung legions of grasshoppers like a haze. Underfoot bluebell and sunflower nodded. And the grove was a place for dreams.

And Dallas—was a wild thing that cannot tell of its wound.

She uttered no complaint even to Simon. The outburst that followed Lounsbury's return was her first and last. She questioned now if her suffering justified a lament. In this she resembled her mother. A woman coming to the section house one torrid day remarked wonderingly that Mrs. Lancaster gave "nary a whimper." The latter looked up with a smile. "I don't think I'm sick enough," she said. "Other people worse off have a right to groan." Dallas, certain that Marylyn's heartache was the keener, would not be behindhand in restraint, and her sister's happiness, forethought and desire to please all drove the thrust of penitence to the hilt and turned the knife in that secret wound.

She found no solace in Marylyn's friends of the calico covers. Her thoughts were too tempestuous for that. They were like milling cattle. Around and around they tore, mingling and warring, but stilling in the end to follow the only course—self denial. Once so rebellious, she was growing meek at last—meek and full of contrition. She was coming to dwell more, too, on the lessons that the evangelist had taught her. She was coming to think of leaning where David Bond had leaned—she who had always been a prop.

There was the old terror that had stalked beside her down to her mother's death. She had fought her way with it, and the conflict had given her strength. There was the jealousy that had smirched her sister love. She had fought it, too, and bitterly, scorning it because she knew it for a hateful inheritance. Now was come a third misery and the worst. She saw herself as a traitor. This was not mere reproach. It was the torture of a stricken conscience.

Her face grew thin, her hand unsteady, her eyes wore a hunted look. At night hers were the scalding tears that dampened the pillow.

And so the days went by. Whatever pangs of remorse, whatever longing she endured, she remained faithful to the resolution that she would not give way to temptation again. But every night brought the lonely watcher to the swale.

CHAPTER XXXIII.

THE dark of the moon was come. All that day the sun had baked, and the steady south blow had been like the draft of an oven. As evening came, brushing a glory of red from the sky, the wind quickened instead of lulling and fetched up clouds that rested on the ridge tops and roofed the wide valley. Through these not a star showed. But now and then, for an instant, the post sprang into sight out of the blackness to the weird play of the heat lightning.

In the stockade there was perfect quiet—a quiet tense with excitement. Secrecy forbade any strong heart songs and dances. Caution advised against mosquito fires, and suspense did away with drumming, shrill laughter and feast shout. The aged men, the women and the children kept close within their lodges, where they whispered and nodded, nose to nose. The warriors stayed outside, preserving their calm with kinnikinick. In the dark the open bowls of their scattered pipes were so many ruddy glowworms.

From the pitchy shelter of the shingle roof Squaw Charley looked out. He sat on his heels, about him the few mangy dogs that had not found the dinner pot. One of them stirred. Half rising he gave it a kick, just as one of his brothers might have done. Then he squatted again, and through the ragged strands of his bang his black eyes sparkled eagerly, for of late every warrior's lodge had seen secret flesh painting. Under every warrior's blanket were hidden gaudy tracings of vermilion, scarlet, orange and blue, and was he not painted too?

He had sought in an ash pile for coals, found a beef bone and snapped it for marrow, next taken from his worn pouch a lump of red earth. He had rubbed the coals to powder in a square of rag, after which he had mixed the powder and the grease to make a paste. Then he had pulled off his mourning blanket and his squaw's shirt and bared his body to the waist.

Vermilion, orange, scarlet and blue—those colors had been laid in stripes, circles and figures upon the braves. They were colors that he, an outcast, might not use, but there was one poor privilege in flesh painting that even he could claim. Kneeling again in clout and squaw's skirt he had smeared the black and red in rude signs upon his chest. The braves, his brothers, had painted themselves for battle, but he, the pariah, had painted himself in the colors of death.

Suddenly he forsook the roof for the shadow of the log wall. There he waited. Two warriors had left the lodge of Brown Mink and were crossing the path. He knew them. The shorter was Canada John, the eldest of the four councilmen. The other was a Sioux who had been captured that day and cast into prison at sunset. He was a giant in stature, wore full war paint and dressed a belt that testified his valor, for it hung thick with scalps, some long and coarse, taken from heads of his own kind, some brown or fair, with the softness that belongs to the hair of white women and children. The two were talking low together. Presently, as they strolled near, the outcast heard the deep murmur of their voices, then their words. He leaned toward them, all ears.

"How many sleeps before the dove calls?" It was the lips of the stranger.

"Perhaps only another," answered Canada John.

There was a great laugh, like the cry of a full fed loon. "Surely Big Ox stays not long! But how can my friend be sure that the Double Tongue will have horses ready?"

"He claims a reward."

"Ho, ho! And what?"

Canada John halted close to Squaw Charley. "There is a cottonwood lodge beyond the river," he said. "It should belong to the Double Tongue. He is kept out. An old paleface and his two daughters seized it in the moon of wild cherries, and they would not go."

"An old man, you say?"

"But he hunts the white buffalo. Only the daughters are there."

"Are they young?"

"Young and sleek. One is called the Plow Woman. She is tall, and she watches like the antelope. The younger has hair like the grass when it is withered."

"They live alone?"

"The Squaw guards"—

"Waff!"

"And the Man Who Buys Skins. May he be struck by the zigzag fire!"

"Who is to have the women?"

Canada John scratched his nose. "The medicine giver says, 'He that first reaches them.'"

Big Ox shook his head in doubt. "The swiftest may yet fail to keep."

"Should any pursue, the women will be killed. The soldiers will think them bit by rattlesnakes."

Again Big Ox burst forth with laughter.

"Sh!"

A hammer clicked from the stockade top. A sentry began to bawl angrily.

"Git, you pup eaters," he declared and slanted his gun to them. Casting dignity aside, they ducked into the nearest lodge.

Squaw Charley dragged himself back to the shingle roof. There he fell prone, resting his forehead against the ribs of a dog. The strength was gone from his body, the light from his eyes. The wind of that other's nostrils had blasted him. He was like the scattering ash heaps of the evening smudges where the last bit of fuel was crumbled and the last red coal was dead.

Long he stayed upon his face. When the first numbness was past and his brain was rallying slowly a very scourge of sorrow visited him—sorrow for the fate of the shack, where he had warmed himself so often, relieved his hunger and known a kindly smile. With sorrow came remorse. He had not done his part for the little home. He had not guarded as he ought. And he had helped by bringing rattlesnakes—which he had been told were to be used for medicine—in the plot for its destruction. When sorrow and remorse had their turn a stronger passion gnawed and racked him. It was the yearning for reinstatement.

Dwelling upon this, he became two Indians, and one of him opposed the other. They traveled separate trails—trails that bent different ways, like the horns of a buffalo. The trail to the right was a warpath. It led him behind his brothers, through the hole in the stockade. For awhile he loitered, loath to share in the work on the bend. Afterward he joined them. They were free and crazy with their freedom. He matched his strength with theirs, dared where they faltered, won—won—

But there was no hope for the Plow Woman!

He was back on the other trail, and it led to the gallery where Oliver's hammock swung. The outcast made swift motions with his hands. He was hustled along with the guard. The sliding panel opened. The tent flaps of Brown Mink's lodge were lifted. He was caught in a mad onrush. He was howled at, spat upon. Finally, a bruised, exiled traitor, more despised, if possible, than before, he fled skulking away.

And there was no hope for his honor.

He was back at the parting of the trails, one man again, helpless before the knowledge that safety for the shack meant the wiping out forever of his dream of becoming a brave.

Of a sudden he remembered David Bond. He got feebly to his knees, covering his face from the dogs. The evangelist had laid a charge upon him—no matter what came, he was to think first of the shack. He had accepted it before he knew it would clash with his own purpose. Was he held to the promise now? David Bond was dead. If he were not obeyed, he could never come back to punish.

He found himself upon his feet, listening. Across the stockade he saw the glowworms of the scattered pipes dancing in the dark. But a moment later, when flashes lit up the huge pen, the hostages were sitting as before, their faces lowered moodily.

Still he listened. And it came again, from the direction of the river—the long, sad cooing call of a dove.

CHAPTER XXXIV.

WITH the third mourning of the dove a figure left the lodge of Canada John and shuffled to the sliding panel, where it knocked. In tardy answer the wicket was pushed aside a little and a lantern was held up.

"Hey, Charley!" said a friendly voice. A white face peered into a red one, noting the uneven bang and the handkerchief tied over the head like a squaw's.

The Indian blinked at the light and showed his teeth in a grin.

Cursing, though not unkindly, the guard pushed the wicket wide. "Don't y' come botherin' me any more t'night," he counseled as a black blanket and a ragged skirt wriggled through.

The Indian grinned again and did not seek to elude the lantern. Released, he shuffled away, going straight for the post. But the stockade left a few rods to the rear he changed his course and made toward the river. Close to its edge he halted and mocked the signal.

The call was repeated softly. Then call and echo neared by degrees, until the Indian and the interpreter were touching hands.

There was no need for words. The night's work was planned. They started cautiously upstream. Before long they were behind the stables, ready for the second step. It was one that devolved upon Matthews. For it he carried a long knife, single edged, keen and slightly curved, like a saber.

First he tiptoed to the nearby repair shop, where the stable guard and two herders were gathered about a lantern, relieving their irksome hours with cheese, hardtack and various tall bottles that once adorned the shelves of the Trooper's Delight. Unseen the interpreter looked in upon the group.

Tied in twos outside the long barn were six horses, the mounts of the guard. Each of the animals was bridled and saddled. Matthews went from pair to pair of the horses, stealing along carefully. When he was done with the six he disappeared inside. Down the rows of stalls his work was surer and more swift. What noise he made was drowned by the rush of the river.

Now Indian and white ally continued upstream. Beyond the northern sentry line and beyond the sod huts of the scouts they spied the first sign of the horse herd they sought, a herd composed of the sutler's spike team, a four-in-hand used on the wood wagon, Lieutenant Fraser's Buckskin and a dozen or fifteen second choice mounts belonging to absent officers. That sign was a spark on the ground a long way ahead. They knew it for the lantern of the remaining herder.

Matthews turned aside toward the landing. "We meet here," he whispered.

The Indian grunted an assent and made off in the direction of the distant spark.

When he came back some time had passed. A flash of lightning disclosed him to Matthews, who saw that the other was wiping at his face with his skirt.

"How did it go, Canada John?" asked the interpreter.

Canada John laughed. "The herder was glad to see Squaw Charley," he answered, "but he fought like a badger."

"Here is the small boat. When you have finished on this side remember the Man Who Buys Skins is on the other. He will be glad to see Squaw Charley too."

"Have you the oil?"

"Yes." The interpreter felt for the other's hand and gave him a can. They parted for the second time.

Canada John now started for the post. As he went he pulled dry grass until his arms were full. Arrived beside the barracks, he began to pile the grass against the pine wall.

In the blackness Brannon lay peaceful. The sentries were announcing their cheery "All's well!"

The interpreter had reached the herd, where he was taking the rope hobbles from the fore legs of several horses. This done he climbed into a herder's saddle and headed the band slowly up the bottom land. Nearly all the animals had seen long service, so they went tamely enough. Where the road along the bank turned west to cross the bluffs through a break they took it and were soon over the ridge and out upon the prairie. There Matthews started them south. Finally a mile or more below the line of the stockade he completed his wide detour by driving them due east. Beside the Missouri he rounded them up and brought them to a stand.

He tied the horse he had ridden to some willows. Next, having unwound several rope lengths from about his waist, he began to catch and tie others of the bunch. He had rope for only ten. The hobbles fastened three more. The remaining horses were gentle, all but the one belonging to Fraser. Matthews swearing in English and Uncapapa, tried every device he knew, but failed to catch her.

He dared not waste another minute. Quickly he wound some grass into a twist, lit it and waved it back and forth above his head three times, after which, as a precaution, he took a flask from his hind pocket and going from horse to horse of the string, to the hobbled three and to the half dozen that were standing loose, rubbed their muzzles with the liquor. But again he was unable to touch the "She Devil." In a fury he threw the empty flask at her.

From his hiding place beside the barracks the Indian in squaw's dress saw the signal torch of the interpreter. At once he sneaked from side to side to listen. Then he took a wisp of grass, bound round it a strip of oily cloth and kneeling beside the bundle farthest from the river set a match to it. Instantly flames leaped up. He ran to other grass piles, lighting them one by one.

The next moment an amazed sentry who was pacing his beat by the scouts' huts saw the growing bonfires and called out in alarm to another. Before the latter could reply the end of the barracks was burning. Both sentries fired their guns. The sergeant of the guard answered with revolver shots. The Gatlings spoke from the lookouts. A trumpet shrilled the fire alarm. From the sutler's sounded the clang of the mess gong.

In the midst of the tumult one spot—the stockade—kept strangely quiet. Its guards were collected at the sliding panel, from where, not daring to leave, they watched the growing blaze. So intent were they upon the sight that they took no heed of their prisoners. Therefore no one knew or hindered when the Indian braves, led by Standing Buffalo and noiseless as shadows, filed into Brown Mink's wicklup, crawled through the breach in the log wall and sped away into the shielding dark.

Behind the squaws and children were gathered, with the Indian girl walking boldly among them. Of a sudden they parted. From under the shingle roof there was a sound of struggling, a thump as a body hit the ground, an old woman's squeal of rage. Then into the faint glare reflected from the fire came a stooping figure in squaw's dress that sped through the scattering crowd, shot into Brown Mink's tent and was gone.

Across the prairie Matthews was following after the flighty cayuse, not trying to catch her, only striving to get her out of the way. Buckskin was willful, however, and as often as the angry interpreter drove her off came circling saucily back to halt in the path of the coming braves. The string by the willows, the hobbled horses and the gentle free ones, were frightened by her into stamping about. But the whisky biting their noses killed the hated scent that was nearing. Not so with the cayuse. She caught it. For a moment she waited, head high, ears a-quiver, nostrils spread. Matthews warned the Indians. They did not hear. As they raced on the mare gave a snort of terror, wheeled and launched herself full against the end animal of the string.

The tethered horses set back upon their ropes, trampling each other and pulling themselves free. The gentle ones, thoroughly scared, went flinging

"Remember your promise," he said.

away with them, while the hobbled, with no cow pony respect for rope, made up a mad, plunging rear.

Consternation seized the Sioux. They were without boats, without weapons, without horses. They cursed. They threatened Matthews.

"Cross, cross!" he cried. "Your bows are in my wood lodge. The soldiers have no horses and no boats. They cannot swim the river. You will be safe."

The Indians rushed back to where hammers had been ringing for days past. They tore away boards of the scaffold. Then returning to the river, they dropped in.

Matthews called after them. "Remember your promise," he said, "and do not drink the water that burns in my lodge."

There was no answer.

And now the interpreter took thought for himself. At sundown he had lusted for the night's doing. But the heart was gone out of him. Even before the stampede the whole affair had assumed monster proportions. He had begun to think of the murdered and of the maiming and had wished himself well out of it. Now, with no horse to carry him across to safety, there seemed to face him only discovery and punishment.

"Well, they drove me to it," he complained. "This wouldn't 'a' happened if they'd give me a square deal." He was wrenching with all his might at a section of the scaffold platform. "I wanted to be decent, and they treated me like a dog."

With this he ran down the river bank and launched his frail raft. "Anyhow," he said, "I'll git out o' this jus' as fast as water 'll take me!"

CHAPTER XXXV.

THROWN down by a sounding board of inky clouds, the alarm shots at Brannon, the shouting, the reports of the Gatlings and the trumpet calls fell sharp and clear upon the shack. Dallas, watching into the blackness from her bench by the door, was up and armed on the instant and leaning far over the sill as if to see the better through the dark. Soon she made out something—a glimmer—that in the beginning was redder than the flare of the lightning, fainter and more fixed, but which, growing as the din grew, swiftly deepened in color, spread wide and rose, throwing into relief the intervening grove of cottonwoods and the form of a man who was racing riverward from the swale. He disappeared, swelling the distant clamor with a cry—a dread cry she had never heard before—of "Fire!"

Presently she went in and bent over Marylyn, touching her gently and speaking low to save her a fright. "Honey, dear, honey. Hop up and see what's happening at the fort."

The younger girl scrambled to her feet, putting out nervous hands to her sister. Dallas quieted her, and they stood together in the door.

And now, across the Missouri, the guns and trumpets suddenly stilled and the shouting lessened, while the glow rapidly thickened into a roaring press of flame, before which darted the troopers like flies in the light of a lamp.

"My, my!" whispered Marylyn, her voice quavering with sorrow and awe. She found her clothes and, keeping in line with the door, began to dress.

"I'll put on my shoes, and we can go down a ways, so's to see close. Shall I, Dal"—

"Sh!" Dallas was leaning out again, her head lowered as if to listen. All at once she turned and, kneeling, felt on the floor for her cartridge belt. "Yes, yes," she answered. "Put 'em on—quick!"

"Are we going down to watch?"

"No."

The barracks and the stables were high, cherry hued pyres, terrible enough to the eye, with their tops crooking northward in the wind. To Dallas' ear they were far more terrible, telling of awful suffering, hinting of direful intent. For the nearer pyre sent proof of a sacrifice. She could hear the screams of a horse.

The belt found, she stepped back to the door. "Hurry, hurry," she said. The old iron resolve never to desert the shack was fusing in the heat of a panic. Her unfailing instinct was hardening a new one that ruled for immediate flight.

Marylyn was working with her shoe thongs, not stopping to thread them, only to wind and tie them around her ankles. She heard her sister exclaim. Then she was seized and brought forward by a trembling hand. "Marylyn, Marylyn! The boat! She's going!"

They looked and saw a black funneled bulk floating across the watery strip mantled by the blaze.

"Maybe they thought it'd burn," suggested Marylyn. "See, there's sparks flying that way."

Dallas leaned back against the door. "I guess—that's it," she said slowly. Then after a moment: "But why didn't they bring her straight across? There's no place to tie up down stream."

"Why, there's fire breaking out all over now," cried the younger girl, forgetting to be afraid in her wonder and excitement. "See! One of the little houses is caught!"

It was the first cabin of Clothespin row. Two or three men were near it. At that distance they seemed gayly posturing to each other in a dance.

"If anything is wrong," Dallas said, "Mr. Lounsbury'll come back."

"Mr. Lounsbury!" repeated Marylyn. "Was he here?"

"On this side, by the grove. I saw him start for the fort."

And so their going was delayed.

Nevertheless Dallas' sense of coming danger was acute, and when before long she heard the trumpet again and saw the troopers fall away from the pyres, leaving the flames to their work, she lit the lantern and held it to where were stored her treasures—a lock of her mother's hair, her father's pipe, the letter she had received from Lounsbury.

"You take the cartridge belt," she called to Marylyn.

The other obeyed.

"Ready?" said Dallas and lifted the lantern to shake it.

She got no reply. Instead, gasping in alarm, Marylyn came headlong to her, pinioning her arms with wildly clinging ones. "Dallas! Oh, help"—

Outside there was a sound of rapid running. Dallas flung herself against the door, driving it shut. A second and a weight was hurled against the outer battens. Then came four raps.

"Don't open! Don't!" cried Marylyn. "Maybe it ain't Charley!"

But Dallas, undoubting, swung the door back, and into the room leaped a stooping figure.

It was Squaw Charley.

He crouched and moved his head from side to side, as if expecting a blow or a bullet from behind. His right hand held a bow, his left a bundle of arrows. With these he beckoned violently, shaking the water from his tattered clothes and pointing over his shoulder to the west.

"We're coming, Charley. Dearie, stand up. Now, now!" Marylyn was dragged to her feet. The light was quenched. The outcast faced about, and the three headed for the river, with Charley leading at a trot.

They paused for the last time near the river end of the corn and close to the coulee crossing. From there Dallas saw that the pyres were lower and that other buildings of the row were ablaze; the roof of a scout hut, too, and the prairie, over which traveled widening crescents of gold. But the fire was the only thing that was moving, for not a single man was in sight.

Charley was not watching toward Brannon, only along the nearer bank to the south.

Of a sudden as their eyes followed his a gun shot rang out from the cottonwood grove.

"Mr. Lounsbury!" cried Dallas, starting forward.

"No, he's gone"—

That moment they saw between them and the landing the silhouette of a figure.

It was not Lounsbury's. It was too short and thickset for his. Moreover, it seemed to be casting aside clothes as it ran.

Like one, Squaw Charley and Marylyn bolted for the coulee. Dallas hesitated, then followed. Near the brink they missed the steep road and went slipping, sliding and rolling down the sumac grown side. Then they struck the bristling bottom, righted, turned their feet up it and fled.

CHAPTER XXXVI.

HIS face as blanched as a dead man's, his voice pealing out above the babel like a bell, Oliver stood to windward of the double furnace, giving quick orders on right and left.

"Two men there on the major's quarters. Let the guardhouse go. Use your blanket, Flaherty; use your blanket, Sergeant," as Kipps passed close by, "clear the row and bring 'em all down here. Don't let 'em stop for anything. Boys, boys, turn out those horses!"

A trooper rushed up and leaned, yelling, to his captain's ear. "They won't go, sir; they're hamstrung!"

Once more Oliver gave tongue, and directions were sent to the stockade and to the line. A signal light communicated with the lookouts on the bluffs.

Kipps was already fulfilling his charge. Through a gap in the northward sweeping prairie fire—a gap fought out and kept open by a line of men—were coming the women of Clothespin row, each carrying a child and dragging a second by the hand. Behind them scuttled the papoose cumbered squaws from the scouts' huts. At their rear trudged the sergeant, also weighted, and jaunty no longer, but leaving red stains where his naked feet touched the hot and smoldering ground.

"To headquarters!" shouted the captain at the foremost laundress in the rout. Then he turned to his trumpeter. A moment after, the fires and the perishing horses were deserted, and the troopers, weapons in hand, ran out upon the parade ground, obeying a call to arms.

Oliver led them. As he approached the flagstaff the voice of a woman hailed him from the gallery of the nearest house. He sprang that way and was up the steps at a bound.

Mrs. Cummings, who had sought refuge in her own home, met him at the top. "The colonel's library is stripped!"

So it was. One hurried look by the light of a lamp showed that not a bow, not an arrow, remained on the walls.

But there was no time for exclaiming or conjecturing. Oliver rushed back to the gallery and bade all the women and children collect and keep within quarters. Around it, under Sergeant Kipps, he stationed a cordon. Next, and while the house was being thoroughly wet down, the ammunition stores were drawn upon, and extra guns and cartridges were carried into the long reception room, where the women could assist in reloading. Barely three minutes had passed since Oliver sent his messengers. But headquarters was fixed to withstand an assault and to protect its inmates. And now, still ignorant of what had befallen, he ordered the remainder of his men into line.

At this point, with the detachment about to move, a volley of rifle shots sounded from the stockade, another and another. Then up went a great hubbub: "The Indians, the Indians!"

Oliver started his troopers double quick across the square. At the hospital one of the stockade guard stopped them.

"The Indians?" croaked Oliver.

"Gone!"

Oliver turned back.

They met a second man, black faced, staggering, frenzied with alarm. It was Fraser. He caught at the captain's ragged sleeve.

"Shot—other side—they're over there—those girls—those girls"— His breath failed him.

Oliver saw the need. "To the ferry," he commanded.

Like one man they bounded headlong across the parade, through the red smoke pouring from barracks and stables and on, only to come short upon a boatless landing, where they crowded upon each other and cursed.

Fraser was half crazed. Oliver took him forcibly in hand. No man of them all, even if not burdened with a gun, could stem the river's current.

"There's one chance yet," he said, "the night herd." He turned to his trumpeter. "Sound the recall and keep a-sounding it!"

Down the bank and into a black, rolly whirl.

Again and again the familiar strain rang out. All looked northward to where they knew the herd had been, to where the long curves of the prairie fire were still moving.

But the minutes went, and there was no answering beat of hoofs. Where were the herders? Why did they not obey?

Again, again and again!

Then to the south a reply! Above the spiteful crackling of the tindery buildings, out of the thinning dark, came a clear, eager neigh!

That way the troopers rushed. Gathering at the flagstaff they saw by the light of the burning piles a single horse come galloping toward them from the direction of the stockade. Her dun neck was arched like a charger's. As she swung proudly into an imaginary line the men greeted her with a cheer.

That greeting was echoed. Until now the Indians had been quiet, as quiet as a flock of scurrying grouse. But the river was between them and their enemy, and they felt secure from pursuit. Moreover, whisky was working. They were boisterous with it. Casting caution aside when they heard that cheer, they answered with defiant whoops.

The cheers of the troopers changed to anguished groans. One, wildly repeating a girl's name, sprang toward the waiting Buckskin. From headquarters came the sobbing of women, the whimpering of frightened children, and then, nearer and nearer, a dull pounding that swelled into the steady plud, plud of unshod hoofs.

Once more a cheer went up. A moment and a cavalcade swept in, a riderless cavalcade, with ropes dangling. It was the night herd, the discarded second choice mounts of the regiment's officers, a motley band that had served their country through more than one enlistment, and that, hearing the familiar summons—some limping, some hobbling—had followed the dun cayuse to answer it.

Now nooses were twisted about the noses of the horses. The troopers mounted. The trumpet sounded the advance.

Again came whoops from across the Missouri. They were farther away than the first.

"Go up—go up to the crossing!" Oliver ordered. "Fraser! Fraser!"

But the buckskin mare, with her master, far in advance of the twenty others, was already plunging down the bank and into a black, rolly whirl.

CHAPTER XXXVII.

FOR all that the way was hard, rough with stones and choked by a tangle of rank growth the three in the coulee made fast progress over the first two miles, Charley led. After him came Marylyn, to whom the loathed split in the plain was become a place of refuge. In the rear, covering her sister against possible attack, followed Dallas.

The strain told first on the younger girl. Before three miles had been traveled, as she sank in a shallow pool to wet her lips her strength utterly failed her. She could not rise and pleaded faintly for rest.

"Just a minute, Dallas, please. I can't go. My side hurts."

Dallas helped her through a hindering weave of pond weeds and lilies and laid her upon some marsh grass beyond. Meanwhile Charley stole back a short distance. But the respite was brief, for he returned straightway and twitched at their dresses, when the elder girl lifted the younger to her feet, whispering encouragement.

Once more they pressed forward. The lightning had ceased. With a last grumble and a scatter of drops the clouds were pulling apart. Here and there a few stars shone. These thinned the darkness considerably, and at a point where the coulee shallowed Dallas was able dimly to see the tolling shapes ahead. Marylyn was wavering.

"Spunky little girl!" urged the elder girl. Lifting the rifle to her left shoulder, she came alongside to give the support of an arm.

"Where's the cartridge belt?" she whispered.

"Heavy," panted the other. "Dropped it."

And now despite Dallas' aid Marylyn straggled weakly. Another mile and with scarcely a sign of warning she sank again exhausted.

"Charley," called Dallas. The Indian joined them. "You take one arm—that's it." She took the other. Thus they proceeded.

Finally Dallas stopped. "Hide, hide," she counseled between breaths. "A dark place"—

Ignoring the advice, the outcast thrust his bow and arrows into her hands, then, squatting before Marylyn, he seized her wrist, drew her, limp and half dead, upon his back and staggered on.

"Hold to Charley, dear," begged Dallas. "He's carrying you pickapack."

The younger girl murmured gratefully and locked her hands beneath the Indian's chin. This left his arms free to part a path through the thickets of burweed and plantain that choked the defile, and for fully a half hour he kept a good jog. But, well worn and hampered as he was, he began then to wabble.

Dallas gave him the weapons and received Marylyn upon her own shoulders. Notwithstanding the long way her vigor remained splendid. And when there came a tendency to lag she fought it stoutly. Not until her limbs refused their service did she drop down.

Under her wild rye made a cool, stiff couch. She reached through it and dug her fingers into the wet earth. Marylyn toppled over back and lay beside her, prone. Charley leaned on an elbow, breathing hard, watching—

When, far behind, down the shadowy crack through which they had come, sounded wild whoops.

They scrambled up, terror stricken. Like hunted deer they whipped away again, knowing that in their wake, instead of the one man they had seen, was a horde!

Once more, though after brave effort, it was Marylyn who compelled a halt. Dallas strove to rouse her. "Try a little longer, honey. Come on, come on!" But the other only sobbed hysterically until Charley put his hand upon her mouth.

"Can't we crawl out?" demanded Dallas. "Quick, they'll pass!"

The outcast shook his head, coming close that she might see his answer.

"No use?"

He shook his head again and signed that their pursuers had horses.

It was a moment of supreme despair. She laid her arms upon her knees, her face upon her arms. Their puny human power had failed. Where else could they look for succor? Would Lounsbury or the troopers come—in time?

Then, tearfully, prayerfully, in this utmost need, she raised her eyes to the sky. "It's not for me," she faltered. "It's for Marylyn."

That upward glance was not in vain. In front of her, lifting their plumelike tops against the heavens, she saw the clump of burial trees. Instantly she took heart, for her quick brain devised a plan—to hide in the cottonwoods!